

Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory



edited by

JANE ADAMSON, RICHARD FREADMAN,
DAVID PARKER



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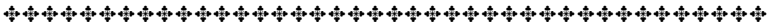
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Deepening the self

The language of ethics and the language of literature



SIMON HAINES

After twenty-five years of confusion and denial, literary criticism in English is starting to rediscover literature as a distinctive mode of thought about being human, and to regain confidence in itself as a manner of attending to that thought. Valuable support in this process of recovery has come from the diverse group of moral philosophers surveyed in this chapter, who have been critical of the dissociated conceptions of language and the self delivered to us, or imposed on us, by the Enlightenment. Even these philosophers, however, have too seldom seen *that*, and hardly ever shown *how*, it is literature which has actually been the principal mode of thinking about this problem since the seventeenth century.

For thirty or forty years now there has been a steady flow of criticism from a group of English-speaking moral philosophers, directed at what they see as the two dominant and interlocking traditions in modern Western moral philosophy. The first of these traditions, predominantly Anglo-Saxon, empirical and utilitarian, derives from Bacon, Locke, and Bentham. It has been represented this century by G. E. Moore and his various 'intuitionist' and 'emotivist' inheritors, especially H. A. Prichard, David Ross, C. L. Stevenson, and R. M. Hare. The other tradition is principally a Continental European one, deriving from Descartes and Kant, with its own twentieth-century incarnations, especially in existentialism.

The origins of the modern group of moral philosophers critical

of these two traditions lie, I believe, in three seminal essays: 'Fallacies in Moral Philosophy', by Stuart Hampshire;¹ 'Vision and Choice in Morality', by Iris Murdoch;² and 'Modern Moral Philosophy', by G. E. M. Anscombe.³ But there are now many philosophers who in their various ways have worked and are still working within a territory first sketched out in the aforementioned essays. A list only of the most eminent would include Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Annette Baier, Martha Nussbaum, and Raimond Gaita. All, however, express the same frustration at our having been told for nearly a century (Moore's *Principia Ethica* came out in 1903) that in ethics the important things are the ones we cannot speak about; or that to speak about them is simply to say 'boo' or 'hurrah' with rhetorical embellishments; or that the moral questions which really matter are not 'How should one live?' or even 'What should I do?', but 'What kind of thing is a moral judgment?', and 'What kind of concept is "good"?' Between them, these recent thinkers have helped to restore to philosophy this lost and vital language of the self: although many novelists and poets, and some critics, might say that for them it has never been lost at all.

The philosophers we are concerned with argue, first, that philosophy since the Enlightenment has never thought historically enough, and that this failing has been deeply damaging this century, not just to our philosophical moral thinking but to all our moral thinking, and therefore not just to our thinking but to our very lives. Secondly, they believe that modern moral philosophy, and again, therefore, our lives, are partly grounded in an impoverished and blinkered philosophy of language, this century's inheritor of a correspondingly inadequate Enlightenment philosophy of mind. Thirdly, they are saying that these philosophies of mind and language spring from – indeed partly constitute – a certain picture of the human personality or sense of the self; and that this picture or sense is, again, both attenuated and deracinated.

The logician W. V. O. Quine once joked that there are two kinds of philosopher: historians of philosophy, and philosophers. In Iris

¹ In *Mind*, 58 (1949), reprinted in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Indiana, 1983).

² In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume xxx, (July 1956).

³ In *Philosophy*, 33, 124 (January 1958).

Murdoch's suggestion that 'morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically' ('Vision and Choice in Morality') we can hear the beginnings of a rebuttal of that deep twentieth-century prejudice. G. E. M. Anscombe's paper two years later argued much more fully that when nowadays we speak of 'obligation' and 'duty', or of what is 'morally' right or wrong, or of a 'moral' sense of 'ought', we are relying on 'an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives'. That special modern sense of the word 'moral', implying an implicit compulsion to act in a certain way, depends, Anscombe argues, on the survival of a law conception of ethics, and ultimately a divine law conception, which only made sense within the now-collapsed Judeo-Christian framework. But we go on keeping a flavour of special compulsion – not always a particularly pleasant one – by preserving a foundational concept like 'morally wrong' to explain a supposedly non-foundational concept like 'unjust' or 'unchaste'. The very fact that her second example may already sound quaint to some ears lends weight to Anscombe's contention that our blindness to the history living within moral concepts leads us to truncate them, to reduce all of them to a few elementary common denominators. We have suffered a real 'loss of concepts', in Murdoch's phrase: and therefore a dilution of experience.

Anscombe's paper was important because in it a mainstream philosopher was thinking both historically and critically about philosophical concepts. Major recent works in this vein, such as Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989) or Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), with their repeated references to 'simulacra of morality' or 'conceptual impoverishment', are likewise both historical and critical: whereas traditional histories of philosophy, including – in this field – Mary Warnock's excellent *Ethics Since 1900* (1960), or even MacIntyre's *Short History of Ethics* (1966), are historical and descriptive. For Anscombe and her fellows, key moral concepts, in general as well as professional contemporary use, can only be fully understood historically. As Taylor would say, history is constitutive of those concepts. They do not have a lightweight lexicographical component of passing antiquarian interest, and then the real, lean and mean, heavyweight, analytical component.

In the words of the American pragmatist Richard Rorty, 'philosophy needs to relive its past in order to answer its questions':

although surely the fuller claim is that philosophy needs to live its past in its present simply to understand its questions. This is precisely what historically minded literary critics have most wanted to say to the more ahistorical literary theorists of the 1970s and 1980s. Just as moral philosophers need to be both historical and critical about the moral thinking they and all of us do, so literary scholars, critics and theorists need to be both historical and critical about the thinking that poets and novelists do, and that they themselves do. They need to stop behaving as if both poetry and criticism were split into lightweight components (lexicography or etymology for some, 'historical context' for others, 'aesthetic qualities' for still others) and heavyweight components (philosophical or political or ethical 'ideas' for some, historical or political 'events' or 'movements' for others). A historical dictionary needs to be recognised and promoted as at least as useful a critical tool as an encyclopedia of poetics. 'Word-utterances are historical occasions', as Murdoch says. This means we have to be alive to the historicity of the word-utterance, as is already being widely recognised once again. But it also means we have to be alive to the history living within, present within, the words uttered.

If, however, literary criticism can profit from these moral philosophers' observations upon the living history present within concepts, the philosophers for their part might more often acknowledge the scale, the intensity, and the kind of warfare which English-speaking poets, novelists, and critics have been waging against the empirico-utilitarian conceptual tradition for the last 200 years: for the first fifty or so (the years of Blake, Hazlitt, Carlyle, and Dickens) without any help or recognition at all from philosophers. Nowadays, of course, there is *some* recognition. Taylor offers his own readings of symbolist poems: MacIntyre, of *Mansfield Park*. But even these most alert and well-intentioned of philosophers still read poems or novels as if they were containers or vehicles with separable concepts inside them, or as if they were examples of re-formulable ideas. Even terms such as 'concepts' and 'ideas' are seen as it were in cross-section, or edge-on, unmetaphorically. It is not enough for a philosopher to respond to such a criticism by saying that to think in this analysing or separating way is just what makes philosophy itself and not another discipline of thought. If moral philosophy wishes to point to a

fundamental limitation or distortion of this dissociating kind in its own previous practice, it should beware of reading, or misreading, literature in just the same way.

According to the moral philosophers we are interested in, another field of philosophy, namely epistemology, is both conceptually and chronologically anterior to mainstream modern philosophies of language, whether Continental or Anglo-Saxon. Further, the mainstream assumes that a certain picture of the self, namely its picture, is foundational for *all* philosophy. Modern philosophy of language has been no more resistant to the influence of that picture than any other field: indeed, as several of our philosophers argue, it has been that picture's most powerful twentieth-century manifestation and proselytiser. Richard Rorty argues that it was originally Descartes who 'made possible a discipline in which ... the problems of moral philosophy became problems of meta-ethics, problems of the justification of moral judgement'.⁴ From an epistemology evolved a philosophy of language; but this century it has been the latter which has chiefly forced a certain conception of moral philosophy. As Cora Diamond put it in her essay 'Losing Your Concepts',⁵ the 'philosophy of mind which is the source of our inarticulateness in ethics presents to us, as a philosophical necessity, that picture of the human personality which our culture in general has inherited from the Enlightenment'. We describe the world of 'sense' and 'reason' with 'scientific language', and bundle all the rest of ourselves, emotions, desires, will, off into a neglected corner. 'In the moral life of beings conceived in such a way, there is no need for moral concepts other than the most general ones like *good* and *right*, together with straightforwardly applicable descriptive concepts.' There are important connections between these almost spatial criticisms of philosophy of language and Anscombe's historical criticisms of the imperceptiveness of modern moral philosophy. Not only the vast array of moral terms we actually live by (shame, courage, modesty, arrogance, sentimentality, confidence, rudeness, dishonesty, integrity, brutality, honour, etc.) but also the small number of supposed master-concepts like 'good' and 'right' have been obscured as much by the Enlightenment's blinkered philosophies of mind and language as by its historical myopia.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1980).

⁵ *Ethics*, 98 (January 1988).

'What linguistic analysts mistrust is precisely language', said Murdoch ('Vision and Choice in Morality'). She was actually talking about R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952), but her remark is full of significance when one thinks for a moment about Saussure, or indeed Derrida. The diachronic life of words is something poets often recognise more readily than linguists do. It seems that we tried so hard and for so long this century to correct the antiquarian philological biases of the last that we became as obsessed by the synchronic as they were by the diachronic. Be that as it may, Murdoch was asking moral philosophers not to abandon 'the linguistic method' but to take it 'seriously': that is, to 'extend the limits of the language' rather as poets do, enabling it 'to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark'. Philosophers, and increasingly the rest of us, have separated language into a scientific and an unscientific component, a clean, perfectly formed part which precisely describes the world of 'sense' and 'reason'; and a messy, shapeless part, much in need of rehabilitation, which imprecisely gestures at everything else. By doing this we have left ourselves in a dilemma over where to put concepts like 'will' and 'desire': in the clean, no-questions-asked scientific part ('I just *want* to'), or in the messy imponderable unscientific part ('I don't know *what* I want')? What we should do, according to Cora Diamond in the essay already mentioned, is pay 'attention to the actual character of language in general and moral language in particular'. The concept of 'a human being' is not the scientific concept of 'Homo Sapiens' plus an imprecise evaluative extra. To grasp it is not a matter of classification; it 'is being able to participate in life-with-the-concept'.

Taking language seriously, in other words, means refusing to think about it as if it were a suspension of grains of sense in an opaque fluid of nonsense, to be separated by the centrifuge of reason. Language is an unseparated medium of life, and to live with it is precisely *not* to centrifuge it, but to use it: to breathe it. Each of the moral philosophers I have mentioned finds his or her own way of saying this. Charles Taylor, for example, comments in *Sources of the Self* that 'with terms like "courage" or "brutality" or "gratitude", we cannot grasp what would hold all their instances together as a class if we prescind from their evaluative point'; whereas to grasp this is to grasp 'how things can go well or badly between people in the society where this term is current'. 'Pre-

scind': do not cut the 'evaluative point' *a priori* off the descriptive shaft. If you do, what you end up with is not a blunt spear, not even a shaft, but just a stick. 'Grasping' 'courage' or 'brutality' is living with that concept, and thus extending your experience. 'Analysing' such a concept must entail some curtailment of life, which is hard for us to accept, as heirs of Socrates and Descartes. Some kinds of thought can actually destroy forms of life. At least, then, let us resist the temptation to separate moral language, as language in general is supposed already to have been separated, into a precise part and a vague part: into a welter of muddy emotional terms and a brief clear terminology of will, desire, and value.

What has happened in modern ethics, according to Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), is that G. E. Moore's 'ban on the naturalistic fallacy' has caused 'two classes of expressions' to be set up as all-inclusive: a small, evaluative one containing 'good' and 'right' and a few other terms; and a large, non-evaluative one including statements of fact and mathematical truths. Whether R. M. Hare is claiming that this distinction between the evaluative and the non-evaluative is really one between the prescriptive and the descriptive, or C. L. Stevenson is claiming that it is really one between the emotivist and the descriptivist, or latter-day Humeans are claiming that it is really one between 'ought' and 'is' (Hume's own position was not so simple): all these descendants of Moore think moral words contain, as Iris Murdoch put it, just the 'two elements of recommendation and specification'.⁶ And as Anscombe was also implying, it seems that the more neutral, scientific, purged of feeling, the specificatory element is, the more moralistic, condemnatory, judgmental, outraged, politicised, ideologically hysterical the recommendatory one becomes. If you filter out all the distinguishing specificatory characteristics of a moral event (ethical, political: but we should beware of 'either/or' language here) then all the evaluative emotional load gets redistributed down onto the few narrow recommendatory terms left. The result is inevitably highly confrontational: a moral walnut being smashed with an emotivist sledgehammer, bits of shell flying everywhere, broken furniture.

Stuart Hampshire urges us, in the seminal 1949 essay men-

⁶ Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection' (London, 1964), in *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London, 1970).

tioned earlier, to remember Aristotle's dictum: *en te aisthesei he krisis*. The moment of judgment (*krisis*), which is also the moment of recognition, of the sudden feeling of really understanding something, lies literally within (*en*) your sensory, imaginative, and moral apprehension of it (*aisthesis*). How adequately you grasp an event determines how adequately you will judge it. Hampshire points out that the contrary view is of 'an unbridgeable logical gulf' between statements of fact and statements of value. This view, as he also reminds us, has prevailed; and it originated with Kant. 'Fact' and 'value' have for philosophers of Hampshire's persuasion become the two lurking villains, the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of modern moral philosophy. Murdoch's 'specification' and 'recommendation' do not have quite the same popular resonance. According to Bernard Williams 'the theorists have brought the fact-value distinction to language rather than finding it revealed there. What they have found are a lot of those "thicker" or more specific ethical notions . . . such as treachery and promise and brutality and courage, which seem to express a union of fact and value.'⁷ Stanley Cavell had put the point in other terms some years earlier: 'both statements of fact and judgments of value rest upon the same capacities of human nature . . . only a creature that *can* judge of value *can* state a fact'.⁸ 'Describing' an ethical 'fact' is an activity possible only between consenting valuers. Their presentation of the morally salient is 'always already' evaluative. They must employ what Williams, following Clifford Geertz, and before him Gilbert Ryle, calls "'thicker" or more specific ethical notions', Taylor calls a 'language of qualitative distinction' and Iris Murdoch calls a 'specialised normative' or 'second-order' or simply 'rich' moral vocabulary. In her recent book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) Murdoch writes that we 'need a "moral vocabulary", a detailed value terminology, morally loaded words'. Moral growth is a matter of reflection, of 'deepening the concepts in question'. It is a 'process involving an exercise and refinement of moral vocabulary and sensibility . . . We learn moral concepts. Not only "true" and "good", but the *vast numbers of secondary* more specialised moral terms, are for us instruments of discrimination and mentors of desire.' This line of thought was already discernible in the 1956 essay, where Murdoch argued that

⁷ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985).

⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford and New York, 1979).

moral concepts should be 'regarded as deep moral configurations of the world', not 'lines drawn round separable factual areas'.

The argument that moral understanding arises in reflection upon 'rich' moral concepts rather than in an ultimately arbitrary 'choice' made by 'reason' between 'actions' amid a world of 'facts' should remind us (although a poet or a poetically attentive critic would hardly need to be reminded) that an 'undissociated' view of language cannot be disentangled from a corresponding view of the self. Here is an illustrative passage from Raimond Gaita's recent book *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (1991):

Descriptions of actions and character through which we explore our sense of what we have done and what we are, of what is fine and what is tawdry, of what is shallow and what is deep, of what is noble and what is base, and so on, are not merely descriptions of convenience onto which we project a more formal sense, focused on imperatives, of what it is for something to be of moral concern. (p. 40)

Moral language, in other words, is not divided, as since Kant we have been impelled to assume, into a specificatory, descriptive, scientific, fact-oriented component and a recommendatory, prescriptive, emotional, action-oriented component: the former grounded in physical reality and the latter, as Anscombe reminded us, in the thin dust which is all that remains of a once-fertile metaphysical loam. But more: because of our Kantian preconceptions we are able to recognise actions, which can be classified within the permissible categories of fact, reason and will; but we cannot recognise 'character', which we feel obliged to enclose in inverted commas and classify within the problematic category of value. We can see what people do but not what they mean by what they do, not *how* they do what they do: and certainly not what they *are*. Yet to criticise someone's thought or behaviour by using a word like 'sentimental' (Gaita's example) is not just to claim in a needlessly obscure way that the thought or behaviour are 'simply' false or wrong: it is to 'mark a distinctive way in which' that thought or behaviour 'can fail', can falsify or misprise its object.

If moral philosophy has not taken the language of ordinary life seriously enough, literary theory certainly has not taken the language of literature seriously enough: has not trusted it enough. The language of literature is the 'thickest' of all: here judgment

most completely coincides with apprehension. And yet to literary theorists the tug of the scientific model so often seems irresistible. They so often respond to the language of literature by separating it, and therefore of course their own responses, their critical language, into factual and evaluative components. But as Gaita also says, moral speech is more poetic than it is scientific. It is not just that we should treat the language of poetry *as if* it were moral language: it *is* moral language, deployed more thoughtfully than by most philosophy. This is a form of 'serious thought' which is essentially concerned with concept-deepening, not with classifying; with attentive, evaluative reflection, not with the false dichotomy 'fact-or-value'. Murdoch constantly talks about literature as being something between an 'analogy' and a 'case' of moral thought. And reading it, taking it seriously, criticising it, is therefore also a mode of ethical reflection, she says: 'the most educational of all human activities'.

But the best of these philosophers rarely offer attentive and undissociated readings of the language of literature (Martha Nussbaum is a distinguished exception). This is a challenge for criticism, an incentive to re-articulate and recover a practice which has lost both confidence and salience under the prolonged dominion of various theoretical schools displaying their own forms of dissociation, their own divided concepts of language and the self. Even critics and scholars like the Americans Wayne Booth, Charles Altieri, and Tobin Siebers, who have already benefited from this most sympathetic of philosophical conversations, slide in some of their recent work towards the formulaic and programmatic.⁹ Siebers is perfectly right to say in his book that the 'danger of ethical criticism is its tendency to think about moral philosophy or about an ideal form of criticism instead of about literature'; but the book itself does not think about literature either. In this metacritical microclimate, so congenial to a conception of poetry as a distinctive mode of moral thought, we need more *critics* actually taking the trouble to *read* it. Meanwhile the wider academic, theoretical, and scholarly climate is still distinctly hostile towards both conception and practice, because so many publishing academics, theorists, and scholars rely on precisely that divided

⁹ See Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep* (Berkeley, 1988); Charles Altieri's *Canons and Consequences* (Evanston, 1990); and Siebers's *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca, 1988).

fact–value picture of language, with its implicated picture of the divided self, which ‘our’ moral philosophers are criticising.

Here is one of the more influential pictures of that picture of the self, again from Iris Murdoch, in her 1967 essay, ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’:¹⁰

We are still living in the age of the Kantian man, or Kantian man-god . . . How recognisable, how familiar to us, is the man so beautifully portrayed in the *Grundlegung*, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy . . . He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal . . . Kant, not Hegel, has provided Western ethics with its dominating image.

All the moral philosophers we have been concerned with are criticising a Kantian picture, or evaluative portrayal, something like this one. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor finds the origins of the picture in the ‘abstracted’ or ‘punctual’ self of Locke, the ‘noumenal rational agent’ of Rousseau and Kant, the ‘instrumentalising’ reason of Galileo and finally the ‘disengaged’ reason, the *cogito*, of Descartes. And, of course, this is also a picture of Miltonic, Faustian, and Byronic man, although the philosophers rarely make enough of the great poetic transmissions, or rather representations, of the picture. Nietzschean, existentialist, economic, and even Rawlsian accounts or metaphors of will, rational choice, views from nowhere, Archimedean points and veils of ignorance can all be seen as descendants of the Kantian–Cartesian universalising, featureless, dimensionless, rational isolated self. What the philosophers we are considering want to do is to replace this self with one that is both less rational – or rather less *rationalistic* – and less isolated. The two undertakings are deeply related, of course; but I shall concentrate here on the first one. As against the Enlightenment tradition, they insist on an *undivided* self, a reintegration, in familiar terms, of reason and emotion, or thought and feeling. This involves a defence of emotion, an attack on a certain conception of ‘pure’ reason and an attempt to merge the two.

¹⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 80.

We are not minds which have bodies but bodies which think, argues Bernard Williams in 'Morality and the Emotions'.¹¹ It is, for example, hard to separate an emotion from a moral judgment. If you call someone's behaviour or character 'contemptible', how do you distinguish between the emotional and the moral content of your judgment? Williams lists shock, outrage, admiration, and indignation as further examples of modes of judgment that are also modes of emotion. Sometimes, moreover, behaviour or character can only be made sense of in terms of an underlying structure of emotion which is neither amenable nor visible to what is usually termed 'reason'. If reason has any purchase on behaviour or character it may only be through putting the 'facts' of a case in a new light, which is not a matter of overcoming emotion but of schooling, teaching or reforming it (this is an essentially Aristotelean position, of course). Some related questions: would you prefer someone to treat you well on principle, because, she said, 'it was her duty', or to do so out of an emotional response to *you*? Do emotions somehow happen to a separable 'us'? If so, where were they before? And where and what were *we* before? Martha Nussbaum asks similar questions in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986); but for Nussbaum, a classicist as well as a philosopher, the questions arise out of some fine and powerful readings of Greek tragedy. She concludes, as much as argues, that emotional response is 'a constituent part of the best sort of recognition or knowledge of one's practical situation': suffering, for example, is 'a kind of knowing'. Ethical perception 'is both cognitive and affective at the same time'. And such emotional response, such affective perception, is essential to literature: essential within it, and essential in our reception of it. Nussbaum is right to say all this and right, too, in *how* she says it. Reading her work should remind literary criticism of what it has always known to be its proper process and subject, despite its recent devaluation and marginalisation of both. Poetry and philosophy can both show us these things, and yet they do not do so in the same way. Nussbaum remains properly aware, as Rorty, for example, does not, that philosophy and poetry have different ways of thinking morally. Real mediation between the two is both important and difficult, and this is criticism's peculiar task.

¹¹ 1965; reprinted in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers, 1956-1972* (Cambridge, 1976).

The defence of emotion undertaken in their different ways by Williams and Nussbaum merges imperceptibly into a critique of 'pure' reason (which in a literary context nowadays usually means one of reason's most influential modern avatars, 'theory'). If there is 'an "I" without body, past or character', says Williams, what is there to distinguish it from any other 'I' ('Morality and the Emotions')? And yet this is the dimensionless, featureless 'I' of reason, the Cartesian thinking thing which goes on demanding deeper and deeper 'reasons', but only of the kind it recognises *as* reasons, until no more can be found, at which point, existentially, it declares the world unreasonable. But Williams also argues that "you can't kill that, it's a child" is more convincing as a reason than any reason which might be advanced for its being a reason'.¹² Enlightenment philosophy (and, again, literary theory, as one of its children) is still mesmerised by a '*rationalistic conception of rationality*', which demands that 'every decision ... be based on grounds that can be discursively explained'.¹³ Stanley Cavell believes that modern philosophy has denied and neglected human selfhood or identity by its continuous temptation to scientific, Socratic, Cartesian certainty.¹⁴ Cavell traces our modern sceptical obsession with certainty back to the seventeenth century's failure to substitute a 'presentness achieved by certainty of the senses' for 'the presentness which had been elaborated through our old absorption in the world'.¹⁵ Nussbaum traces the obsession with certainty back to Socrates' promise of a *techne* or method to defend us against *tuche*, contingency or luck. But all these philosophers distrust the belief that 'morality is rational only insofar as it can be formulated in, or grounded on, a system of abstract principles' which can be applied almost computationally so as to govern all rational people.¹⁶ The fact that some people feel they need such principles does not mean there *are* any. Ethical theorists 'wrongly tend to assimilate conflicts in moral belief to theoretical contradiction', as Williams puts it in 'Conflicts of Values'. Perhaps we

¹² Bernard Williams, 'Conflicts of Values', 1979, reprinted in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge, 1981).

¹³ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 18.

¹⁴ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*.

¹⁵ Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*', 1967, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, 1976).

¹⁶ Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson, eds., in their introduction to *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism* (Albany, 1989).

cannot abstract or separate a rational, theorising 'self' from the disposition or desires which it supposes itself to be thinking 'about'. Can we ever look at ourselves entirely 'from the outside'? Can we ever make the basis of our relations with others entirely, rationally, theoretically explicit? Perhaps it is a misconception of what thought is to suppose that only something like a theory 'really penetrates the appearances' of morality.¹⁷ Maybe moral thought is more like 'a reflective dialogue between the intuitions and beliefs of the interlocutor ... and a series of complex ethical conceptions, presented for exploration'.¹⁸

Many of these points, as I have suggested several times, could just as easily be made in the context of modern literary and critical theory as in that of modern moral theory: the misconceptions and ignorings of poetic thought involved in the former are much the same as those of moral thought in the latter. The coincidence becomes even clearer when moral philosophers start calling for a reintegration of emotion and reason in terms of 'dissociation', that once all-powerful concept, invented by T. S. Eliot, which Frank Kermode encouraged us to be sceptical about many years ago, at about the time when this movement in moral philosophy was beginning. I believe we still need the concept. Bernard Williams argues that there is a fundamental error in 'dissociating moral thought and decision from moral feeling'.¹⁹ For Cora Diamond 'dissociation' means an inability even to see the failure in the relation between our experience and our thought. She and others like her direct their writing, she says, at 'those whom the kind of dissociation they discuss is *in* ... someone within whom the dissociations of our culture are well rooted'.²⁰ If we see the self as a dimensionless, choosing, willing, rational point, then the emotions will seem to rage blindly, savagely, and uncontrollably all around it, threatening all the time to warp judgment and compel wrong action. Even its best decisions will seem arbitrary, unconnected, and absurd. So why dissociate 'reason' and 'emotion', or fact and value, at all? Why appoint 'reason' the moral guide or perceptual centre of the self? Yes, we must have *some* generalisa-

¹⁷ Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London, 1991).

¹⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1986).

¹⁹ Bernard Williams, 'Utilitarianism and Moral Self-indulgence', 1976, reprinted in Williams, *Moral Luck*.

²⁰ Cora Diamond, 'Losing Your Concepts', *Ethics*, 98 (January 1988), pp. 255-77.

bility, some means of transcending the welter of contingency and the limited or egocentric perspectives of the self. But why respond to this need, as philosophy has done over and over again from Socrates to Bentham and since, by separating the self into a part which feels and a part which fears, controls, measures, and rules the feelings: which, in short, *has* the feelings? Why dig and then fall into those deep crevasses between reason and emotion, between action and passion? Without them choice ceases to be a mystery or an absurdity, and becomes a genuine mode of reflection. The central moral question is no longer, as the major modern traditions would have it, 'What should one do?', but 'How should one live?'; and 'life' becomes much more than conduct. As several of our philosophers insist, above all Nussbaum, Diamond, and Murdoch, literature is a mode of ethical reflection in which this central question is always at least as essential as it is in philosophy. It is encouraging to see how many more critics, as well as philosophers, there are thinking about literature in such ways in 1993 than there were in 1983.

The 'Kantian man' depicted by Iris Murdoch is lonely as well as divided. He is dissociated from others as well as within himself. Clearly the range of reflection on this kind of dissociation is both continuous with and as broad as the range on the other kind, but there is not space here to explore it at the same length. Raimond Gaita seems to me quite right to claim, in *Good and Evil*, that the 'serious contrast' is between 'non-reductive humanism', whose major progenitor is Aristotle, and various kinds of 'ethical otherworldliness', whose ancestor is Plato. It seems to me that the really interesting point on what one might call the spectrum of self-transcendence is the one where these two great schools meet. On one side of that imaginary central point (we can of course never find it) Aristotle will seem somewhat complacent; on the other Plato will seem rather authoritarian. On one side, only Plato's passionate mysticism quite answers to our need for spiritual transcendence; on the other, only Aristotle's diurnal tolerance quite captures our need for humanity. Lying more or less around this notional centre is a conception of the self, not as the old irreducible, impervious, and unchanging central core, but as a nevertheless 'substantial' and 'continually developing' permeable coalescence of affection and reflection, of 'attachments' and desires. Beside this there is an equivalent conception of a 'rich and

complicated reality' which transcends the self without necessarily transcending *everything*, and which infiltrates the self without dissolving it.²¹ Then, just a little off centre, is what both Gaita and Murdoch call 'non-dogmatic mysticism', the sense that 'moral advance carries with it intuitions of unity which are increasingly less misleading'.²² This is more or less the sense of an absolute good (or evil) which, far from being 'thin', is the thickest of all concepts. Much further off centre, at least on *my* spectrum, is the need of a MacIntyre or an Anscombe for a foundational and dogmatic metaphysics underpinning that sense. Off centre in the opposite direction is the need for an equally foundational and dogmatic humanism, defining itself by its refusal to recognise that same sense. I need hardly add that literature has been the mode of modern thought which has most consciously explored these various types of self-transcendence, when even philosophers have often simply assumed them, as the unacknowledged legislators of systems of thought.

There are two rarely associated thinkers whom I believe to be central to this conversation about literature and moral philosophy: a twentieth-century philosopher and a nineteenth-century critic. One could plausibly claim, as many of these philosophers explicitly do, that it is Ludwig Wittgenstein's thought about morality and art which lies behind most of these arguments. For Wittgenstein morality and art are both modes of *being*, not of fact or of fact-versus-value. This might be shown to be true, or at least nascent, even in early Wittgenstein: in the *Tractatus* and the 'Lecture on Ethics'. And of course the later Wittgenstein makes those famous pronouncements on meaning as use and on description rather than explanation as the proper solution to the problems of philosophy and of life. If Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger are indeed, as many believe, the two philosophers who this century have done most to redirect their discipline away from its Cartesian and Kantian affiliations, then students of the two foremost disciples of Heidegger, Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer, will hear many analogues of their thought in what I have been saying. But they are analogues, not echoes. These are two distinct conversations.

²¹ The quoted terms are Iris Murdoch's, from 'On "God" and "Good"', 1969, in Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*.

²² *Ibid.*

What about the nineteenth-century critic? English literary criticism is a discursive practice which has existed in a more or less recognisable form for about 250 years: since Dr Johnson. It evolved as an unusual means (unparalleled, arguably, in other languages) of putting discursive, reflective, or philosophical prose into close contact with poetic and dramatic poetry; and although the scope of its material has since Johnson extended to include the novel, the more philosophical voice of criticism has retained its attentiveness and responsiveness to the voice of poetry. And that conversation of poetry and criticism has for most of its duration been predominantly ethical. It is David Bromwich's acute observation²³ that two separate subtraditions exist within this general critical tradition. The first includes Johnson, Hume, Burke, Hazlitt, Arnold, and, significantly, Wittgenstein. These writers believe, according to Bromwich, that criticism may be carried on without some founding version of reality or standard of objectivity, but just with the binding force of common habits of reading, and the long duration of certain opinions which acquire the force of custom. The other tradition is an essentialist one, seeking a single right interpretation and an epistemological method. This is the way of German idealism, of Coleridge, and of the latter-day Coleridgeans who have dominated modern academic criticism and literary theory. Bromwich believes that 'criticism is a language for discussing representations of the way people live and think and feel', not 'a map to a special province of truth'. For Coleridge poetry and morality must be grounded in some single great principle or Truth, visible to a trained clerisy but not to the ordinary reader, in which opposites are reconciled or held in synthetic tension and symbol plays a key revelatory role. For William Hazlitt, however, there is no founding principle and nothing for symbols to refer to, no reason why opposites *should* be reconciled, and an ordinary reader who always matters more than the clerisy. I believe Bromwich has a point, and that a critical practice which holds up Hazlitt and Wittgenstein as exemplary may well be of more use to us now than yet more of the one which has for so long held up Coleridge and, more recently, Heidegger.

More use, for example, in trying to explain how it was that

²³ David Bromwich, 'Literature and Theory', 1986, reprinted in *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Burke to Frost* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); and *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (Oxford and New York, 1983).

between the 1790s and the 1820s so many English-speaking poets failed to escape from that central Cartesian self, with its search for a theoretical account of the world and, often, its sceptical disillusionment with the eventual failure of the search. Yet at the same time some of the best novelists, so unlike each other in other ways – Austen, Scott, Edgeworth, Peacock – *did* escape these things. Why? And why, some years later, did Browning and Dickens escape, but not Tennyson or Mill? And does the question have any bearing, this century, on the poetry of Eliot and Yeats? Or the novels of Lawrence? Or more recent poetry and fiction: Pynchon and Bellow, for example? Or Martin Amis and A. S. Byatt? To take a particular case: Shelley's extraordinarily instructive ten-year passage from egocentric theorising to untheorised and self-forgetful evaluative description.²⁴ This is something a dissociated Coleridgean criticism cannot even see, as Diamond would have predicted: and yet such a criticism is what Shelley has mainly suffered. This criticism has looked either for excesses of lyrical feeling, or else for symbol and progressive social theory and Oedipalism and transcendentalism and scepticism and Platonism, etc. The seventeenth century taught us to pursue 'knowledge'; but as our moral philosophers are saying, as Wittgenstein and Hazlitt would agree, and as Shelley put it, we lack 'the creative faculty to imagine that which we know'.

²⁴ On this, see Simon Haines, *Shelley's Poetry: The Divided Self* (London and New York, 1997).